

DEVIANT HINGE EPISTEMOLOGY AND EPISTEMIC ANGST¹

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Abstract: Deviant Hinge Epistemology is a view on the epistemic justification of empirical beliefs which grows not only out of Wittgenstein's considerations from *On Certainty*, but incorporates a larger amount of the views expressed by the later Wittgenstein and also some further developments by other philosophers (Elizabeth Anscombe's action theory and Wilfrid Sellars's critique of empiricism, in particular). I try to prove the virtues of Deviant Hinge Epistemology by applying it to Pritchard's Closure-Based Sceptical Paradox and showing how it can be solved without either falling into Mooreanism, or making hinges non-propositional.

Keywords: *Hinge Epistemology, Closure-Based Sceptical Paradox, Empiricism.*

While Wittgenstein's writings have inspired both exegetical and philosophical work, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two. Wittgenstein's remarks from *On Certainty*² (henceforth OC) are no exception, but since my interests right now are purely theoretical I will disregard in what follows the exegetical accuracy of the different views inspired by OC, my own included. I will, however, note that most of these views consider that some of our beliefs (or at least some of our non-propositional commitments³) are not the subject of any epistemic evaluation⁴ (or

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² Wittgenstein (1969).

³ See Pritchard (2016).

⁴ See Coliva (2015). Also, see Coliva (2016), 79–96 for a taxonomy of hinge epistemologies.

at least they cannot be justified) and that is precisely why they are to be called "hinges". In contrast, my view is that one can justify a belief which can be used to express a hinge, so this is why I have labelled my theoretical proposal a „deviant hinge epistemology”⁵.

The initial aim of deviant hinge epistemology was not to thwart scepticism, but to hint at how one could justify empirical knowledge in spite of the Private Language Argument's conclusion that no experience, conceived as an inner episode to which only the subject having it has direct access, can be semantically relevant and therefore epistemically relevant⁶. The aim of this paper is to show that deviant hinge epistemology could also produce a non-Moorean rejection of radical scepticism. I will consider a version of radical scepticism introduced by Duncan Pritchard – the *Closure-Based Sceptical Paradox*. However, in order to do this I will start with a sketch of deviant hinge epistemology (DHE, for short).

A preparatory claim of DHE, then, is that our actions have a conceptual content which is expressed in the descriptions under which their agents would accept them as intentional⁷.

With this in place, one of the main claims of DHE is that "having the experience that p ", when used in sentences like "I have the experience that there is a chair in front of me" by a person engaged in an epistemic practice, does not describe the sensory input one has, but it rather says that the person has performed an empirical action under a description which includes p – for instance, she has watched and touched the chair in front of her.

Now, it is not like we usually need to justify our empirical belief that p by saying that we have the experience that p , but if one was asked "What is your justification for believing that p ?",

⁵ To be fair, mine is not the only view according to which a hinge can be the subject of some epistemic evaluation. See, for instance, Wright (2004a) and Wright (2004b). However, the differences between my view and Wright's epistemic reading of OC will be quite obvious in what follows.

⁶ See Ștefanov, G. (2016).

⁷ The suggestion for this comes from Anscombe (1963), §6.

one could meaningfully answer that one has the experience that p ⁸, since such questions and replies are acceptable moves in the game of knowledge, so to speak.

What, then, is an empirical action? The class of empirical actions is going to include such actions as watching something, listening to something, touching, poking, smelling, etc. or more generally making direct observations on objects from your environment within a shared epistemic practice. This means that the tag of "empirical action" is not applied to a particular action in virtue of an intrinsic character like "causing a sensory input in its agent". It could be said, for instance, that my action of opening the door of my house to get inside causes me to have some sensory input, but that does not make it an empirical action, since it is not performed as part of an epistemic practice⁹. On the other hand, listening to a potential sound source in order to know what sound it does produce and hearing nothing would still count as an empirical action¹⁰.

It would appear that according to DHE the ground for my belief that there is a chair in front of me right now could consist in some empirical actions which I perform on the chair in front of me¹¹. This is indeed so, but it raises an additional problem: "How can an action justify a belief?"

The answer, in a sketch, is as follows. Let us say that A follows by reason from B if and only if either:

- (i) Doing B is a sufficient condition for assuming a responsibility for doing A.

⁸ See OC, §553.

⁹ This could, of course, be an empirical action if I opened the door in order to find out something about it – to know whether it is unlocked, for instance.

¹⁰ More things could be said about empirical actions, of course. For instance, the idea that when one "describes experiences" as part of an epistemic practice one actually talks about one's empirical actions could perhaps illuminate cases such as the one described in Wittgenstein (1951), §626, when a person has "the sensation of touching in the tip of the stick".

¹¹ This is inspired by OC, §204.

or:

- (ii) Assuming a responsibility for doing A is a necessary condition for doing B.

Now, let's assume for the moment that my belief that p amounts to a set of actions, including verbal actions¹² which I am responsible to perform as if p was the case. Thus, to believe that there is a chair in front of me will amount to assume a responsibility for performing the actions in that set¹³. Also, since I could not perform the action of touching the chair in front of me, *under this description*, without believing that there was a chair in front of me, it could be said that my belief is a necessary condition for my empirical action. But then it would also be true that my empirical action is a sufficient condition for my belief¹⁴. The only thing we need to add at this point is that if a belief follows by reason from an action, then the agent of the action, having successfully performed the action in question is justified to have the respective belief¹⁵.

This seems to displace the problem of justification from beliefs to actions. However, if one adopts the view according to which the class of our intentional actions is a subclass of the events

¹² To "opine that p " would be such a verbal action. See, for instance, Ștefanov (2009). A belief that p could not be a private mental episode according to the later Wittgenstein, in any case. See, for instance Wittgenstein (1951), §260.

¹³ Besides opining that there is a chair in front of me when asked about it, the set could also include sitting in the chair in front of me when invited to do so, trying to move the chair in a different room when a chair is needed in that room etc. (I do not want to reduce beliefs to dispositional states, though. I could have the belief that there is a chair in front of me without being inclined to perform all the actions in the set, as long as I assumed a responsibility for performing them; and also for not performing them).

¹⁴ I consider (i) and (ii) to be equivalent. This could be challenged. See, for instance, Sanford (1989).

¹⁵ In other words, by successfully performing some empirical actions from the set S of actions performed as if p was the case I am justified for assuming a responsibility for the performance of *all the other actions* in the set S .

which we know to occur "without observation"¹⁶, justification can stop right here. One can know without observation that one successfully watches and touches a chair in front of her. This can be correctly described by saying that the person in question did experience a chair in front of her. For the same person, the belief that there is a chair in front of her follows by reason from having the experience of a chair in front of her. Thus, it could be said that our epistemic subject has an empirical justification to believe that there is a chair in front of her.

Now, it could be said that from (i) "There is a chair in front of me" and (ii) "If there is a chair in front of me, then there are external objects" it follows by reason that (iii) "there are external objects", the last sentence being such that it can be used to express a hinge. According to DHE, there is nothing wrong with that, since being a hinge does not consist in being a certain type of sentence. As a hinge, the existence of external objects is assumed by our practice of describing our actions as something which we do in an environment containing external objects. Without this assumption it is difficult to imagine what concepts of "action" or even "practice" one would have.

If one does not believe that (iii) can express a hinge, the fact that (iii) can somehow be justified should not raise any problems, since (iii) could not be justified *as a hinge*.

What if one believes that (iii) can be used to express a hinge? In that case, it still could be said that (iii) is not justified *as a hinge*. One could, for instance, justify (iii) in an attempt to answer the question "What are all the things which I can be said to know if I

¹⁶ This is due to Anscombe (1963), §8 (also, §§28-30), but the roots of this view can be found in Wittgenstein (1951), §627-8. I know that Anscombe's view is disputable, but here I cannot enter into the details of that dispute. In addition, I am only interested here in empirical actions. I sit in a chair right now. I am inclined to say that I know that this is what I do without observing that I sit in a chair. This, however, does not mean that I cannot observe that I sit in a chair – an empirical action. Now, *for this second action*, I would say that I am quite convinced that knowing that I perform it does not involve observing that I perform it (on pain of an infinite regress), but only describing it correctly.

know that there is a chair in front of me?". This could be just an exercise in epistemology.

Of course, a skeptic could intervene in such an exercise and try to point out that (iii) cannot be justified, since it is somehow assumed for the justification of (i), but then one could reply to the skeptic that (iii) *was not justified as a hinge*.

The next strategy such a skeptic could adopt is to point out that (ii) also rests on an unjustified premise, namely that (ii*) "the chair in front of me is an external object". This, however, is going to change the meaning of (i), since (i) was used to say that there is a chair in front of me *as an external object*. From this point of view, one would need to say (ii*) only if one would have said that (i*) "there appears to be a chair in front of me".

The skeptic could of course reply that this amounts to saying that (ii*) is also a hinge. "Only in this case", she would continue, "the assumption that the objects which we act on *are* the objects of the external world is useful just for practical purposes"¹⁷.

Now, a non-deviant hinge epistemologist might pinpoint the problem here to the acceptance of (iii) within the domain of our knowledge and hope to solve it by making hinges non-propositional. However, silencing the skeptic by refusing to talk about what she calls an assumption seems to be a weak move to me.

Let us trace back our steps. The starting point of an empirical justification, according to DHE consists in our empirical actions. These are paradigmatically conceived as actions performed on external objects, which are known without observation by their agents. Knowledge without observation is not knowledge without sensory input¹⁸, of course. When such an input is too scarce or otherwise misleading, or when our sensory apparatus is malfunctioning, we could still go wrong.

Think, for instance, of the grid illusion¹⁹. In encountering such an illusion I might describe my experience by saying that I

¹⁷ See OC, §19.

¹⁸ I use the phrase "sensory input" in an eliminativist fashion.

¹⁹ Hermann L (1870).

observe some grey dots at the intersections of a white grid on a black background. However, if I was engaged in an epistemic practice, I would notice the illusion when trying to observe individual "grey dots" and failing. For any epistemic purposes I could still describe my experience in terms of the empirical action I am performing – by saying that I watch an image of a white grid on a black background, for instance, but that would be all. I could not say that I watch the grey dots precisely because that description would not be appropriate as a description of an empirical action. I cannot perform such actions on objects which are not external²⁰.

What if I was asked to talk about "my experience" which included the grey dots? I could perhaps say that there appear to be some grey dots at the intersections of the white grid in my visual field. Now it would seem that I am describing my sensory input in a psychological vocabulary.

However, two things must be noted. The first is that I would not be engaged in an epistemic practice anymore. Not as an agent of such a practice, in any case, intending to know something (although I could be the subject of a psychological experiment on the topic of the grid illusion). The second is that my ability to talk about *what I appear to observe* (the grey dots) depends on my ability to talk about *what I observe*²¹. According to DHE, to talk about your perceptions is to engage yourself in a non-epistemic practice, the functioning of which depends on the successful description of our experiences, conceived as empirical actions, i. e. observations of external objects.

This means that a skeptic who wants to talk about the difference between what I perceive and the external objects from

²⁰ If one wanted to use Wittgenstein's vocabulary, one could say that this is a grammatical sentence.

²¹ I think I can safely adopt this moral from Sellars (1997). To state his view in my own vocabulary, I would say that I must be able to assume responsibility as the agent of an action A, under that description, in order to be able to withdraw my responsibility from the same action A in such cases in which I think I might not have performed it successfully.

which my perceptions are derived must be able to engage in the epistemic practice of performing empirical actions under descriptions such as "I observe x ", where x is an external object. Since the hinge expressed by (ii*) is embedded into such practices, the skeptic cannot simply discard it as an assumption "required only for practical purposes".

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We can now look at the Closure-Based Sceptical Paradox. In Duncan Pritchard's formulation, the Closure Principle can be stated like this:

(CP) If S has rationally grounded knowledge that p , and S competently deduces from p that q , thereby forming a belief that q on this basis while retaining her rationally grounded knowledge that p , then S has rationally grounded knowledge that q ²².

For the present purposes an alternative formulation of (CP) could be:

(CP*) If S knows that p and q follows by reason from p for S , then S knows that q .

Since (CP*) is less strict than (CP) in its formulation, the acceptance of (CP*) will imply an acceptance of (CP).

As for the paradox itself, it consists in three statements:

- (I) One cannot have rationally grounded knowledge of the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses.
- (II) The closure principle.
- (III) One has a large body of rationally grounded knowledge of the external world²³.

²² Pritchard (2016a), p. 74.

²³ See Pritchard (2016b).

Again, we can adapt this for the present purposes by using (CP*) and talking simply about knowledge instead of "rationally grounded knowledge".

As for the radical skeptical hypotheses, they seem to follow this pattern: "my sensory input is caused in different way from the one I believe to be the case" – I am a brain in a vat, this is a dream etc.

Of course, we do not want to give up either (III) – our knowledge of the external world, or (II) – the Closure Principle. But any hinge epistemologist would agree that Moore's rejection of radical skepticism is circular.

Pritchard's own solution seems to depend on the claim that the Closure Principle does not apply to hinges, but DHE cannot use that, of course. However, we did distinguish between (a) justifying a sentence which could be used to express a hinge and (b) justifying a hinge. The main point of hinge epistemology is to distinguish between skeptical doubts, which are shown to be doubts with respect to hinges and therefore need not be addressed, on one hand, and regular doubts, which can be addressed.

Now, according to DHE, a skeptical hypothesis attacking a sentence which could be used to express a hinge, but is not, as such, a hinge, can be seen as a regular doubt. This can help us distinguish between skeptical hypotheses according to which the external world is very different from how we think it is and skeptical hypotheses according to which there is no external world, since the second kind of hypotheses cannot be expressed as regular doubts.

What DHE allows, however, is that some skeptical scenarios expressed like regular doubts can be addressed and rejected, contrary to (I). However, in order to develop such scenarios, the hinges must be in place. For instance, the brain in the vat scenario derives its power precisely because it leaves the impression that some hinges are still in place. Of course, if the external world is completely different from what we know, any talk of brains, electric impulses in our neural nets, sensory inputs and so on makes no sense. So, if we wanted to turn the brain in the vat scenario into something usable to express a regular doubt, we

would need to accept that at least our knowledge about our brains and their functioning is knowledge about the external world and also that we have enough knowledge of the external world to be able to form a robust concept of causality. Only then could one ask whether our brains could function in an environment quite different from the one provided by our bodies and be stimulated in a different way from the one in which we believe they are stimulated and so on.

More generally speaking, in order to express a regular doubt one has to accept a part of our knowledge of the external world and doubt the rest. One may of course wonder how small can be the part which must be accepted in order to express such a doubt convincingly, but that is beside the point. Most regular doubts originating from skeptical scenarios can be easily dismissed, and if some were not, formulating them would be a part of our shared epistemic practices. Such practices can, after all, even produce changes in our hinges.

To sum up, then, DHE seems to imply that at least some sentences which could be used to express hinges can be justified, known and even doubted, but not *as hinges*, while engaging a radical skeptic. This can produce a non-Moorean rejection of (I) only when by a "radical skeptical hypothesis" we mean a hypothesis obtained by turning a skeptical scenario into a regular doubt. That aside, DHE can still solve the Closure-Based Sceptical Paradox without falling into Mooreanism. In fact, the danger of Mooreanism is null for DHE, since the justification of our empirical beliefs is conceived in DHE in a manner incompatible with that of Moore. After all, the strength of DHE resides precisely in this different view of empirical knowledge, according to which one knows by taking part into some shared epistemic practices, which include empirical actions and not passive stimulations of our senses as a basic move.

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